Parashat Va’etchanan Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11; August 17, 2024

Shabbat Shalom - Last week we began reading Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Torah, the book of retelling, recounting, and specifically the words of Moses as he speaks to the Israelites as they are in Jordan, about to enter The Promised Land.

The Parsha for this week, Va’etchanan, ( VA ET CHA NAN) is a pleading. Moses pleads to God to be allowed to enter The Promised Land. God refuses. God tells Moses to climb the mountain, go to the summit of Pisgah, and look out to the west, the north, the south and the east and see the land… but Moses will not be allowed to enter.

To understand why we must look back to Numbers, 20:12. At that time, the sister of Moses, Miriam, had died and, and as it was written in the Torah, “the community was without water.” Miriam had been associated with a well that sustained the Israelites during the exile. Now, without water, they turned to Moses. They were angry that he brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness where there was not enough food or water for themselves or their animals.

Moses turns to God. God instructs Moses to speak to the rock and it will yield its water. Moses assembles the congregation, but rather than speaking to the rock, he strikes it twice with his rod and water flows freely. There was enough water for all and for their animals.

The Lord then says, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

This is a very difficult passage. Moses, who faced Pharaoh and demanded freedom from slavery, Moses who led the Israelites through the parted waters of the Red Sea, Moses who held the Jewish people together during the long years in Exile, will not be able to complete the journey he began decades ago. He will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

This narrative of a devoted leader who cannot complete the work he began resonates with a contemporary situation. A few weeks ago, President Joe Biden, a boy who grew up with a stutter, made the decision to step aside and not seek reelection. Joe Biden has devoted decades of his life to public service. He had envisioned a second term as President to continue his work on the challenges facing America.

In explaining his reason for not seeking reelection, President Biden said: “I’ve decided the best way forward is to pass the torch to a new generation. That’s the best way to unite our nation. You know, there is a time and a place for long years of experience in public life. There’s also a time and a place for new voices, fresh voices, yes, younger voices and that time and place is now.”

In the Torah portion that we read today, a new generation is about to enter the Promised Land. Almost everyone, who left Egypt as a slave 40 years ago, has passed away.

Moses continues to serve as a leader and a teacher. He is the teacher who prepares this younger generation for life in a new land. He instructs them to follow the laws that God has given them, to recall the Covenant, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, and warns them not be swayed by other customs or religions.

The words of Rabbi Tarfon from Pirkei Avot are especially illuminating in this context. Rabbi Tarfon, who lived in the time after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, said: “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to disengage from it.”

Moses, even in his personal disappointment, even though he knows he will not be entering the Promised Land, does not disengage from the task at hand.

Moses continues as the leader by gathering the congregation together and in the Plaut edition of the Torah, Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4 through 9, Moses says: “ Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gate.”

These words, the cornerstone of Jewish prayer and Identity, the first paragraph of the Shema, were delivered by Moses, when he knew that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Yet he channeled his energy and devotion to God to ensure the values and laws of the Torah were firmly embedded in the hearts of the Israelites as they prepared for a new life in a new land.

This parsha offers deep insights into leadership, and the enduring impact of one's efforts. Success is not only measured by achieving one’s goals, but also by the dedication to one’s principles. While we may not complete every task, we are not at liberty to forego pursuing them, and our have efforts have a lasting significance and may inspire those who follow.

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Shabbat Shalom